Technical Writing Review

VOL. 1 NO. 1 JUNE, 1954

First Annual Election Held In May

Incoming President Accepts Symbol of Office

The first annual meeting of the Society of Technical Writers, the election of officers meeting, selected Dr. Paul H. Flint to succeed Floyd Hickok as president.

Other officers elected were Ronald D. Eames vice-president, Ralph Fullerton treasurer, Hyman Kana secretary and Robert K. Schnitzler and John V.E. Hansen as members of the Executive Board. The retiring president also becomes a member of the board automatically by regulation of the by-laws.

HISTORY

The occasion of the first annual meeting is a time for reminiscing. The first informal gathering occured on Oct. 7, 1953, when fifty persons representative of a number of facets of technical writing met in a room at M.I.T. The meeting, with Floyd Hickok as temporary chairman and Mrs. Margarethe Callahan as secretary, resulted in the naming of a committee to consider the question of formal organization. Members of this committee were Eugene Schroeder, chairman, Robert Schnitzler, Joseph

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PANEL DISCUSSES SCOPE OF TECHNICAL WRITING

What is technical writing?

What fields does it encompass, and is editing and illustrating also properly classified under "technical writing?"

The Society of Technical Writers held a panel discussion April 22 at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 28 Newbury Street, Back Bay, to sound the question, "Interpretation of Technical Writing; What does it mean?"

Panelists were Dr. Francis H. Achard, president, Experience Associated, Moderator; Miss Betty S. Karasik of the Air Force Cambridge Research Center; Mrs. Margarethe L.Callahan of Raytheon Manufacturing Co.; Dr. Paul H. Flint, assistant dean of Tufts College Graduate School; Frederick T. Van Veen of Jackson and Moreland; Wentworth Kennard of Metcalf and Eddy; Robert K. Shnitzler, engineering services head of Ultrasonic Corporation.

Results of the discussion were to establish some criteria for the evaluation of technical writing under the following headings:

CONTENT

Subject matter relating to engineering, science and research.

AUDIENCE

Professional and occupational reader interest.

PURPOSE

Instructive and informative.

FORMAT

Analytical.

The panel established these criteria as a guide rather than an inflexible equation.

But what of technical editing? Is it collaboration or proofreading? Should the technical editor be required to have the knowledge and habits of thought of the engineer in order to rewrite ambiguous material in a writer's text? Is he someone who rushes around with an order to "give me 50 pages on this" and then edits the copy to the extent of "an even distribution of semi-colons?" The panel equated editing with writing on the basis of ability to develop interest, foster understanding, insure correct

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Technical Writing Review

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HOW TO WRITE *about* TECHNICAL WRITING

This first issue of a publication sponsored by the Society of Technical Writers is honored by the appearance of an article by Mr. Wilson L. Taylor of the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois. There is significance, beyond the immediate contribution to the subject of readability, in the publication of Mr. Taylor's article in these pages.

The Society of Technical Writers has proudly proclaimed itself to be a professional organization, and, on that basis, must be dedicated to the enhancement of technical writing. There have been querries in the minds of many people about the means that such an organization as STW could use to enhance professionalism. Particularly, what could the Society's journal print, of a scholarly nature, that would contribute to the progress of technical writing? Mr. Taylor's article, quite apart from the context, suggests that there is indeed an unexplored frontier in communication, especially scientific communication as represented by technical writing.

Mr. Taylor is noted for his contribution to the development of "cloze procedure", a new tool for measuring readability. Cloze procedure is one of several efforts, such as the Flesch or Dale-Chall formulas, to apply research methods to communication through written language. Readability is one of the areas currently being investigated intensively.

Technical Writing Review must open its pages to the broadest aspects of technological communication in order that STW may be of service to technical writing. The meeting of minds through specialized information is essential for cohesion and survival of a technological society. Those concerned with the publication of *Technical Writing Review* will be happy to examine manuscripts that delve into the deeper implications of technical writing. Suggested subjects are: studies of technical writing using cloze procedure methods; heuristic, stochastic, Markoff, or ergodic processes; the relation of technical writing to such areas as linguistics and engineering communication theory; measurement of language efficiency; comprehensibility; semantics.

These suggestions do not limit the range of interest that should be expressed in the news and special articles appearing in *Technical Writing Review*. There will no doubt be a vein of scholarship exposed and developed. There will be "how to do it" articles on all phases of publication work. There will be aids to education. There will be news and views on all the problems common to those who write, edit and publish technical literature.

Now it is not necessary to tell technical writers how to write. It does seem important, however, to encourage the readers to become contributors and to suggest to them the general line of approach that is desired. Since *Technical Writing Review* does not want to pour all of its material into the same mold, contributors are urged to write in a scholarly manner when they deal with a scholarly subject, in a how-to-do-it manner if they are writing an instructional article, or in a newspaper style if they are supplying news. Most of the literature about technical writing, in the near future at least, will probably be that appearing in these pages. The reader-contributors will have the opportunity to set an important pattern.

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ELECTION

Ulman, Frederick Ashenhurst, and Kenneth Young. This committee drew up a set of by-laws which were adopted, with some modifications, at a general meeting at the Hotel Kenmore, Boston, on Nov. 24, 1953.

The important points of the by-laws, which establish the framework and philosophy of the Society, may be summarized as follows: The name was chosen for its brevity, its euphony and for the fact that it conveyed the meaning of all types of occupational interests among the membership--it is the practice of technical writing that is served by all types of individuals to whom the Society appeals. The aims of the Society were stated thus--to develop and establish standards for technical writing, to stimulate the exchange of information of common interest in this and allied fields, to encourage the development and training of technical writers, and to acquaint others with the profession. Graded membership was chosen as the device that, on the one hand, granted professional accomplishment and, on the other, gave the privilege of Society membership to many who are in need of an organizational home. Definition of the qualifications for membership was made a duty of the membership committee. Discussion of these qualifications is found on page 3 of this issue.

Election of the first officers was held Jan. 21, 1954 at the Academy of Arts and Sciences auditorium, Boston. The officers elected were Floyd Hickok, president, Dr. Paul Flint, vice-president, Ralph Fullerton, treasurer, Hyman Kana secretary, and Dr. Jean Caul, Ronald Eames and Stancliffe Hurst, members of the Executive Board.

MEETINGS

Feb. 24, 1954. Talk by Alan Smith of Arthur D. Little, Inc. about his methods and experiences in publishing their Industrial Bulletin.

March 30, 1954. Illustrated lecture by Sam Reed on "Photon", the new method of setting type photographically.

April 22, 1954. Panel discussion on the meaning of technical writing.

SOCIETY PROCEEDINGS

TENTATIVE MEMBERSHIP QUALIFICATIONS

The knotty problem of membership qualifications has not yet been resolved in its finer details, but interest in the matter is such that it seems wise to publish the trend of thinking. This trend was shown in the report of the Membership Committee at the annual meeting. The report is summarized as follows:

To be eligible for the grade of:

MEMBER--an applicant shall demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Membership Committee a sincere interest in the advancement of the professional fields of Technical Writing and Technical Publications.

SENIOR MEMBER--an applicant shall have the following qualifications:

1. A minimum of one year as a Society Member.
2. A minimum of one year in responsible professional charge of one or more technical writing projects.
3. A minimum of four years in the general field of technical publications.

STUDENT MEMBER--an applicant shall be a student at a recognized school beyond secondary level and have an interest in technical writing.

SPECIAL MEMBER--an applicant shall fulfill the basic requirements for the Member grade but shall work and reside beyond the commuting distance of Boston.

"Responsible professional charge" is deemed to be having full responsibility for directing and/or supervising at least three divisions of work such as writing, editing, photographing, drafting, layout and production.

PROPOSED BY-LAWS CHANGES

At the annual meeting two by-law amendments were proposed. These will be voted on at the September meeting.

I--Change Sections 1, 3 and 4 of Article III to read:

Section 1. There shall be five grades of membership: Member, Senior Member, Fellow, Student Member (non-voting), and Special Member (non-voting).

Section 3. Until September 1, 1955, Members, Senior Members and Fellows shall have the same rights and privileges.

Section 4. Dues. The annual dues of the members of the Society shall be as follows:

Member --- $5.00
Senior Member --- $7.50
Fellow --- $10.00
Student Member --- $1.00
Special Member --- $2.00

II--Change Article IV, Section 1 to read:

Section 1. There shall be five regular meetings held each year: one each in the months of September, November, January, March and May. Two consecutive meetings shall not ordinarily be held on the same day of the week.

TOWARD A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Our first year has been successful. The several committees, the Executive Board and the Society members have shown a healthy enthusiasm. The progress realized has been the product of hard work inspired by professional interest.

Steady growth during the coming year will be the keynote. To foster growth a plan has been formulated that will enable distant members to become active in the Society. The plan is aimed at nationwide expansion.

WIDESPREAD INTEREST

So many inquiries have been received from other states that a "Special Member" category has been established in order to bring the professional benefits of the Society to a wider audience. Special Members must possess the qualifications for Member or Senior Member. Dues have been established at $1.00 for the present, which entitles the Special Member to the honors of the Society, communication with others in the profession and copies of all publications issued. The Special Member is essential to the plan for nationwide growth. To date Special Members represent the following cities: Washington, D.C., Hamden, Conn., Pittsburgh, Pa., Warwick, R.I., Wynnewood, Pa., W. Hartford, Conn., Dennis, Mass., S. Charleston, W. Va., Alliance, Ohio, Chicopee Falls, Mass., Passaic, N.J., Chicago, Ill., Park Ridge, Ill. and Charleston, S. Carolina.

THE PLAN

The Society invites petitions from Special Members for assistance in forming local groups. Petitions are to be signed by six Special Members in the same general area and addressed to the Secretary, Society of Technical Writers, 28 Newbury St., Boston 16, Mass.

Within the next few weeks each Special Member will receive a list of the Special Members in his area. If there are not six listed in any area the Society is counting on the Special Member there to interest qualified individuals in joining.

After the Executive Board approves a local petition the group will receive instructions, assistance and advice to enable an effective local chapter to be successfully established.

THE EARLY BIRD

The first five local groups, including Boston, established under this plan, will be considered charter chapters. It is suggested that the local groups operate for a time under by-laws similar to those of the Boston chapter. When five such chapters are established representatives will meet and adopt a national constitution.

THE GOAL

The single purpose of the expansion program is to further the aims of the Society as stated in the by-laws.

Thoughts About National Organization

NATIONAL SOCIETY OF TECHNICAL WRITERS WORTH MILLIONS TO AMERICAN INDUSTRY

Philip H. Van Itallie
Wyeth Laboratories Philadelphia

An urgent need exists for a national organization through which technical writers may be able to meet, to exchange ideas on the techniques of presenting technical facts in a clear, accurate, and yet interesting manner, and in using illustrations effectively to supplement the written word.

The field of technical writing is a huge one, and encompasses technical journals, trade journals, promotional magazines of all types, sales and operating manuals, technical advertising, scripts for technical moving pictures, the preparation of public addresses, and the teaching of science.

Men and women perform the functions of technical writing with all sorts of educational backgrounds, from the most inadequate to the most impressive. Some start out with a study of journalism and learn by experience to fit their language to technical needs. Others are chemists, engineers, physicians, technologists, architects, etc., who through force of circumstances have the task of writing thrust upon them.

The need for competence in expressing technical data so that others who are not specialists can understand what is written without undue difficulty is becoming more and more acute with the increasing complexity of industrial development. Specialization is growing to such an extent that even technically trained persons have great difficulty in understanding what is going on in closely related specialties, each with its own technical jargon.

Much technical writing published today is unintelligible to any but the initiated. The resulting "scientific obfuscation" is hampering education and industrial sales. There is at present no medium through which persons with proved experience can impart their knowledge gained by practice to writers who are badly in need of help and guidance. An active national organization of technical writers would be a boom to American industry and would be certain to receive the latter's wholehearted support.

CLEAR, UNAMBIGUOUS WRITING

Milton H. Aronson
Instrument & Apparatus News Pittsburgh

Contrary to the beliefs and writings of most technical men, and technical writers (and ALL technical men become technical writers for various periods of time) every technical thought has as its nucleus one or two basic concepts which are themselves (1) simple in concept and (2) capable of simple explanation in words. The technical writer must seek out the basic concept, must understand it, and must present it, simply and unambiguously, in words.

Hence one main function of an organization of technical writers is to provide a meeting place where technical writers can (1) discuss the problem, (2) search out the weaknesses and general lack of satisfaction of most technical writing, (3) perfect better techniques, and (4) call attention to the importance of good technical writing and technical writers in the highly technical civilization of today.

All this may sound obvious; but it is by no means easy to accomplish. Ambiguity is not easy to define or to recognize; yet it exists in some degree in every written sentence. There are no criteria for clarity and organization; yet the educational value of a technical manuscript depends in large part on the clarity and organization. It is as difficult to become objective about one's own writing as it is to see one's own mannerisms. A society of technical writers, on a national scale, is needed to establish standards, criteria, objectivity, and recognition for technical writing.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

Sherman H. Hubelbank
Connecticut Telephone & electric Co.
Meriden

A major problem in establishing a regional section of a national association of technical writers in a sparsely industrialized area is that the few technical writers in the area might be located many miles apart. As a result, it is often impossible to know whom to contact and how to properly arrange a meeting of the interested parties from so many different areas.

With the establishment of a headquarters of operation, such as now exists in the Society of Technical Writers, and the publication of a journal, the major problems can be overcome with a great deal of ease.

For example, the organization could take a listing of the various manufacturers in a particular state or area and screen this listing for companies that might probably employ technical writers and forward them questionnaires. After reviewing these questionnaires, the most central place for a meeting could be determined and a meeting place located. Then an organizational meeting of a regional section of the Society could take place.

It is to be assumed, of course, that at least one person has previously expressed sufficient interest in organizing the regional branch and that this person will participate in the reviewing of the responses to the questionnaire and the general organizational problems.

OTHER GROUPS

Groups with interests similar to those of the Society of Technical Writers are meeting in several parts of the country. There is one headed by Mr. R.T. Hamlett, Great Neck, Long Island, New York, another by Mr. Samuel A. Miles, New York and another by Miss Martha Walker Gerrard, Oak Ridge, Tenn. *Technical Writing Review* would be pleased to publish news about these or other groups.

Language Rules, Usage, and Readability

Wilson L. Taylor

Institute of Communications Research University of Illinois

Today's interest in "readability" may be looked on as part of a widespread democratic revolt against the language-use dictatorship of tradition, formalism, and authority.

At stake are certain of the long established and zealously defended rules that prescribe what dictionary makers, grammarians, and composition teachers are pleased to call "good," "accepted," "correct," or "standard" usage.

There is evidence to suggest that some cherished rules, unless they are altered to conform to actual current usage, eventually may be discarded altogether. It appears probable that "It is I" must finally be supplanted by "It's me;" that "With whom did you go?" will yield to "Who did you go with?"

In any event, the relation between established rules and actual current usage can stand inspection. The same goes for the current revolt and for the basic assumption from which readability, in its newer meaning, stems. In a way, all these topics are one.

ARISTOTLE AND THE EMPHASIS ON FORM

Comprehensibility has been important ever since human communication began to develop. This is so, of course, because a communication that fails to convey its meaning is without effect. Until recently, however, there were no very useful ways of trying to estimate effectiveness itself, so the original emphasis was placed on form.

It seems obvious that if all members of a culture group use their language in exactly the same way, they should understand each other perfectly. It was reasonable, therefore, to seek standardization by inferring formal principles of usage for everyone to follow--if only they would.

The history of formal-rule making, at least for those languages which are derived in any way from Latin or Greek, goes back about 23 centuries to Aristotle, and perhaps farther. Aristotle discussed parts of speech and sentence construction and he laid down certain principles. His conclusions were based partly on the way ancient Greek had been and was currently being used--and partly on his own notions, esthetic and logical, of how it should be used.

From the beginning then, the rules of language usage "improved on" actual usage. And since then, particularly during the last few centuries, teachers, writers, philologists, and orthographers have managed to invent, elaborate, and perpetuate an enormous number of additional rules for "good" usage.

RULES AND LIVE LANGUAGES

There is nothing wrong with rules themselves as long as they perform a needed service well and don't get out of date. But they are easier to apply to dead languages than to live ones.

Functionally effective languages are alive. They change to suit new discoveries of knowledge. They borrow useful words from each other. They grow more streamlined, or perhaps more complex, according to the shifting communication needs of the peoples they serve.

A living language can be defined as that set of relationships between meanings and symbol-combinations that is actually being used by most of the members of a group when they communicate successfully with each other. That set of relationships is continually, though gradually, being remodeled by circumstances and by the process of use...A living language, then, is made up of average current usages.

Now rules that accurately describe and summarize a living language's current usages are valuable and necessary to one who is trying to master the language as quickly as possible. Such rules help the school child and the immigrant to learn to write readably and speak listen-ably. Obviously, the rules should be as simple and inclusive as possible; rules that are complex, subtle, and difficult to apply make learning slow and incomplete.

Good rules, among other things, must be up-to-date. As a language changes, the rules that describe it should change also. But in point of fact, language rules--those of English among them--ordinarily do not live up to this requirement.

Once they are formulated, rules tend to persist and even to resist changes in the language they are supposed to describe. Nevertheless, living languages must and do change when the need arises, and the outcome is that the people concerned become saddled with two languages, a "classical" one that is little used and poorly understood by the many and a "vulgar" or current one constantly used and well understood by almost everyone. In time, a people may collect a whole series of languages of varying degrees of "classicism." English, for example, is a set of languages that runs from Beowulf through Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Henry James to Ernest Hemingway and Erskine Caldwell.

Recall that language rules are seldom pure reflections of actual usage in the first place--their perpetrators and relayers tend to "improve" them in line with personal tastes and philosophies. Add to that the fact that rules tend to persist long after they have become anachronisms.

For these reasons, the rules of "correct" usage cannot be trusted very far as guides to readable writing. They may bear little relation to the kind of writing that can communicate most effectively with the majority of people.

READABILITY AND DEMOCRACY

The concept of readability, in its current use as referring to a communication quality that needs to be--and perhaps can be--objectively identified, analyzed, and measured and then put to work, is only about 20 years old.

It is rooted in the assumption that the primary purpose of language is to communicate thought and meaning as effectively as possible. It follows that the best way to use language is the way that communicates best.

In short, this newer point of view emphasizes maximum intelligibility at the expense of form.

The measure of an author's competence,then, ceases to be his degree of deftness in performing smoothly within the restrictions of "accepted" usage. Instead, the true measure becomes the extent to which his writings easily, quickly, and accurately convey his meaning to the readers he addresses. And if what he writes is of universal concern, then he should make his style conform to that best understood by the greatest number of readers.

This does not mean that the writer ignores all the rules. They simply have ceased to be sacred. They have been demoted to the status of mere tools of varying usefulness that are to be used or avoided with regard to their apparent value in most successfully putting across what is to be said.

Of course, all this may not matter to those who think of writing as a disciplined art form rather than a means of mass communication. It certainly would not have mattered much in times when literacy was largely a symbol of professional or social status and the average man was a serf.

All this does matter a great deal, however, to modern democratic ideals of government; such ideals must stand or fall on the success with which average common citizens participate in making political decisions.

A democracy, considered as a whole, is only as good as its average citizen. Its chance for survival is relative both to the strength of opposing forces (external or internal) and to the ability of average men to analyze and combat them. And this average ability depends above all on the average level of knowledge about pertinent facts, issues, methods, and probable results.

Further, the minimum level of knowledge necessary to survival is not static. The necessary minimum rises as opposing forces become stronger.

Adequately raising this knowledge level involves the effective communication to all citizens of constantly more pertinent information. And how this can be accomplished is one of the major problems facing all democracy everywhere today.

The development of an "experimental science of readability" and the practical application of its findings might well contribute much to that problem's solution.

TOWARD A SOLUTION

The solution would require the cooperation of (1) readability-minded experimental researchers and (2) a group of educators and "authorities" not only engaged in perpetrating language rules but sufficiently liberal in attitude.

The researchers would try to discover and establish what current language usage really is. They would use the best available sampling techniques to conduct surveys. They would use the data to make careful inferences about usage, then test their inferences experimentally, using some form of traditional comprehension test--or better yet, perhaps, "cloze procedure"*--as a criterion of comprehensibility.

Upon being supplied with the findings, the rule perpetrators would act in accord with them. The rules of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax taught in schools would be revised as indicated.

By such a process, formal usage rules would become at last--and perhaps for the first time in history--accurate descriptions of actual current usage, hence truly dependable guides to readable writing.

To keep up with change, such a revision process might be needed every five years or so--or perhaps only every ten, possibly in conjunction with the national census.

*Taylor, Wilson L. "Cloze Procedure:" A New Tool for Measuring Readability," Jorunalism Quarterly, Fall 1953, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 415-433.

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"REPRO." Trade lingo for "reproduction proof", which also need an explanation. It means a copy taken from set type for the purpose of photographing and making into offset plates.

PANEL DISCUSSION

terminology and maintain the scientific point of view.

Technical illustrating was included as technical writing since it enhances the finished product and aids in the reader's grasp of the subject. Other types of work were placed in "Fringe area" status.

In summation, technical writing is similar to ghost writing since it carries no by-line....It seeks to anticipate and thereby answer the reader's question before he asks it....The field of technical writing is defined in its exclusion by subject - i.e. engineering and the sciences ....The fact of exclusion by subject means the field of technical writing is directed in a degree to a professional or limited, specialized audience as differentiated from a general audience....Technical writing is an information service as opposed to entertainment....It is a specialization of interest and not education based on a functional need.

The panel put forward its findings as tentative and suggested further exploration of the subject.

The Society's Aims

1. developing and establishing standards for technical writing. 2. stimulating the exchange of information of common interest in this and allied fields, 3. encouraging the development and training of technical writers, and 4. acquainting others with the profession.

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